

*By Tom Absher*

# *Forms of Praise*

## FORMS OF PRAISE

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Tom Absher has said of his poetry that he hopes to make poems that are like the chairs and tables constructed by anonymous Shaker carpenters — men who drew heavily upon the ways and needs of the day-to-day world to produce objects elegantly suggestive of another world in our midst.

"I like my work best when it originates in necessity yet surprises me, when I both recognize and discover myself in the poem. In this sense, my poems may be most deeply about me when they are least narrowly autobiographical."

Though he is fearful of "the pretension gap that often yawns between such statements of intent and the actual accomplishment," few readers will doubt that Absher has achieved his goal of writing poems that are "sturdy, accessible, yet offset by mystery and grace." In such works as the following, entitled "Wife," the reader, like the poet, will recognize, discover, and surprise himself, transmuted and touched by mystery and grace.

The domestic gods are the ones I fear the most.

The gods that sleep in the wiring of the old house,

the ones that hide in cans of food,

the one darkness under our bed

and each of the children's beds.

One night when I couldn't sleep

a passing car's lights threw shadows from a tree

on the walls of our room

and in your sleep you said:

*oh dear* and then, *up is up*.

The house and everyone in it remained asleep

and as I looked at your face

I saw all the safe and quiet I would ever need.

Tom Absher is professor of English at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont.





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This collection of poems is dedicated to the members of the Plainfield Workshop: Louise Glück, Barry Goldensohn, Lorrie Goldensohn, Paul Nelson, and Ellen Voigt. The *Heloise and Abelard* poems are for my wife, Linda McCarriston.



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# 1

## FORMS OF PRAISE



## 1. Vespers

It has rained this afternoon  
and the landscape is a darker green.  
Wind rushes up and down the hillside  
until the field shudders like something alive.  
I linger at the screen door accepting these gifts  
watching the evening draw away into one corner of the sky.  
None of this will ever be quite enough.  
As if in gesture to something out there  
in the deepening shadow of the porch  
I raise my hand to touch my face in the darkness.

## 2. Wife

The domestic gods are the ones I fear the most.  
The gods that sleep in the wiring of the old house,  
the ones that hide in cans of food,  
the one darkness under our bed  
and each of the children's beds.  
One night when I couldn't sleep  
a passing car's lights threw shadows from a tree  
on the walls of our room  
and in your sleep you said:  
*oh dear* and then, *up is up*.  
The house and everyone in it remained asleep  
and as I looked at your face  
I saw all the safe and quiet I would ever need.



### 3. Breath

Sometimes late at night I am drawn into my children's rooms  
to stand by their beds and watch them sleep.  
With the house quiet I can hear each child  
make a soft groove in the darkness.  
Everything in the room moves inside that rhythm,  
the gentle gathering entering deeply in the body  
then the smooth deliverance.  
The sound holds me to it  
and I feel my own breath joining in  
our one whisper passing through the silence like a sail.

#### 4. The Porch Couple

Summer evenings we spend out front  
watching a blue heron weave the river.  
The house is quiet as a bowl of fruit.

The upstairs rooms are cleared and sealed.  
We sleep in the warm room, next to the kitchen.  
The barn is dark, exhausted.

Like the tall birches gathering daylight  
beside the road,  
we've nothing left to do.

## 5. The Given

After weeding all morning in the garden  
we take the midday meal inside  
where the light is gray.  
A loaf of raisin bread sits on the cutting board.  
My daughter pours milk in a glass;  
it splashes the sound of a word: *promise*.  
Outside the insects and birds and flying seeds  
wheel on into the afternoon  
as if there were not enough time.  
Watching trees traffic in the open air  
I stand at the kitchen window eating a sandwich,  
happy to be tired and mindless in the body.

## 6. Guardian

Once or twice a year I drive over to Lightning Ridge  
and look at where we live from across the valley.

I can just find our place in the fading light  
and a strange feeling comes over me.

It is as if those sleepless eyes I sense are always on us  
are only my eyes. At dusk the house slowly brightens  
along with others on the hill, each room setting forth its  
theater.

I try to imagine what my wife and children are doing.  
By the time I head back the house is completely shining,  
letting go of its light like a star.





## Home

Somehow then, we have come to live here.  
From inside the house our lives  
reach out and up the long field in back,  
drawn into that welcoming hillside  
to its crest.

Groups of yearling doe come out  
in the evening to feed—  
and every morning it is still there,  
the field, amber and open  
taking us in, answering our voices.

Huge, like part of a brain,  
one boulder lies rooted in the grass  
at the top of the hill.  
Farmers tried to move it  
but it reaches down too deep,  
one of the world's old bones showing through.  
An elder among stones  
it broods there looking troubled in sleep.  
And all of us, the deer, my wife and children  
we circle it quietly with our lives  
so as not to wake the eye of the stone.

## Fable: Hansel

We were always  
the wrong people for one another,  
my mother and father and I.  
It was our one secret.

Stopping the car beside the road,  
my father walks into the desert night  
looking for me. He leaves the door open.  
Mother stares at the sky  
and fiddles with the radio.  
He climbs the sandstone cliffs—  
the moon, chill and bearded,  
lights up the sand like snow.

Softly, more like a child  
than I have ever seen him,  
my father stoops every few feet  
and puts a coin on the sand  
on his way back to the car.



## Vanishing Point

All day I sit by the window  
staring into one backyard after another,  
forgetting them, letting the rhythm of the train,  
the question and answer scenery  
bring on surrender.

There are so many of us. There is so much  
of everything. Some children on a hillside  
wave. I wave back.

At night the train takes a long curve  
changing direction and for an instant  
I can see the engine. Now the moon appears on my side.  
A single farmhouse stands out on the plains,  
one light on upstairs.  
I turn in my seat straining to watch that light.

## Friend Poem

I know what you probably think but I do it anyway.  
Every day after lunch I pray for your life.  
We have question marks, sun signs—  
let there be absurd gestures:  
a man kneeling at noon by the desk in his office.  
Someone, say me, gets up in the morning  
and worries about the waistline, falling hair;  
someone, say you, loses her breasts one day to a clean knife.  
With hands that smell of lunch covering my face,  
hands that touched your breasts,  
it's easy to make a small darkness to reach into.

## The Swimmer

—for Louise

All at once the young woman rises up out of her  
composure  
and strips to white skin. Her baby reclines on the blanket  
opening and closing its fist in sleep. She walks to the  
water's edge,  
looks across the lake framed in wilderness.  
There is little time. Evening air chills the body  
and leaves it ringing. Standing there,  
she might be planning for a life like no other  
or she might be gauging the distance.  
She wades in. With deep regular strokes  
she pulls across the surface. From the distant bank  
a startled heron lifts away calling out.

## Hunting with My Father

When I was a boy we always did it this way.  
I wake to the smell of coffee  
and you are at the fire,  
its flames mirrored in your glasses.  
Buck, the Colonel's dog, sleeps on beneath the bunkhouse  
his old legs quivering with problems of their own.  
The raw south Texas dawn is about to break  
and at the camp we are quiet as we eat.  
Three deer hang gutted from a live oak,  
their long shapes still graceful.

Father and I will hunt this desert  
as if our lives depend on it,  
but the kill is not what draws us here.  
Every morning we walk the long mesa  
slowly working the ravines overgrown with mesquite.  
When we come to a water hole we will post for hours  
watching the gray end of the afternoon.  
Standing there, deep in the silence of animals,  
my father is showing me the greater world  
that I might find my resemblance in it.

## Dying

My body gathers itself in to be near me  
but it will never get what it wants.  
Already the tiny hand has arrived in the throat  
to greet each breath and number it.  
Over the rooftops, over the church's angel,  
the sheer moon rises, eyeing these sheets,  
and I make ready now to believe anything.

## Harvest

The farmer walks to the center of the field  
and runs his fingers along a stalk of wheat  
finding and denting a single kernel with his thumbnail.  
He does it privately, as if examining a tender part of his body.  
For days the family has been preparing for this—  
long tables beneath the shade trees to feed the threshers,  
the heavy oven fired night and day  
its heat shimmering along the roofline.  
As he walks back through the tall grain  
the farmer says something to himself,  
and warm air moves over the field sending ahead  
the deeply swaying, silent yes.







## Summons

Waking up winter nights  
the sky looks clean,  
bearing the moon's bruised face  
huge-ringed like a brain in a bowl.

My children are disturbed in their sleep  
by the wind and its mindless longing.

From the window I watch a lunatic fox  
race for his life across the hard crust.

Moving downstairs and through the house  
trying doors and windows,  
I live my life now  
as if preparing for bad news.

## Scotland

### 1. Dumfries near Locherbie

The farmhouse is low and thick and goes on and on.  
We are ushered through one room after another  
until the last door closes on a low parlor,  
bright and cheerful with family. As guests  
we are given places in front of a small fire  
struggling against the damp. Tea is set.  
Our talk winds back on itself to the weather,  
the farm. Lambing of the ewes has gone badly this spring.  
The pound sterling is falling. An only son will leave  
to find work as a shipwright.  
Later, standing tall at the supper table,  
Uncle Hugh says to no one in particular  
if there were anything in the world he could do besides farm  
he would do it. Then with two massive fingers  
he carefully lifts the lid of a steaming bowl  
and counts the potatoes.

## Scotland

### 2. In the Highlands

We have driven for an hour and seen no one.  
Mountains bear down on the treeless glen  
with their ancient names: *Broad Carin. Lochnagar. Ben Tirran.*  
Scattered on the slopes sheep bow their heads  
each with its own bell beneath a sad face.  
When low clouds drift across the road we stop.  
This scene with all its reflected light  
is so like an old picture of heaven it quiets us.  
Against an occasional bell  
locating the sheep to each other in the mist  
I say to myself:  
*This is where I would come if I never wanted to be found.*

## August

The afternoon air is so still and heavy with heat  
everyone in the house has gone off to nap.  
I let the tap water run a while over my finger tips  
waiting for the cold stuff to come from the spring.  
Bulkhead clouds appear in the kitchen window, comically grand.  
Time settles over the edges of the house like a glass dish  
and except for the white butterflies flashing in the tall grass,  
the world seems to have stopped.  
This could be the very moment  
when the shrubs and weeds will have reached their full growth.  
As the water cools in my hand a silence works its way  
down through the hayfield, across the yard and into the house.  
It is in my presence. I can feel it with the tiny bones in my ear.

## Early Morning

Dressed in a long yellow robe she leans against the bed  
watching her toes. Soft air and light  
pass into the room through curtains  
and no one in the house has spoken a word.  
Sleep has left a delicate impress about the eyes and mouth  
—a child's face, keeping its secret in the dream of the body.  
I can do nothing with what I feel for you.  
I have time, before the water boils  
sending miraculous curls of steam above the pot,  
before the sun rises over the tree line  
reaching deeply into the heart of the morning,  
but I stand inside your doorway  
unable to move across the distance.

## Country Burial

The graveyards out here lie rough and shabby  
beside those mindless dirt roads  
that find their ways everyplace,  
even back to your house.

The thin stones lean away from each other  
with age. Some are speckled over,  
some worked clean, shining in the sun  
like lenses. They are dreaming in bone,  
catching the last lights, whatever.

The genius of this place is earth,  
its dark action making claim.

## Gravity Feed

In summer when the afternoon begins to turn  
slowly letting go of each color,  
the dog and I go for one last outing in the field.  
She runs off on some rich scent—  
loses it and circles back, then loops away  
through the tall grass  
like a hand sewing.

When I reach the top of the hill  
the sun hangs directly above our house.  
It notches the roofline, then drops  
making one window  
flash on the inside like a signal.

Coming back at dark I can see my daughter  
dancing alone in her room to the radio.  
I roam around the yard, studying the lines  
of the house, trying to absorb its shape.  
I wait until the very last to be drawn  
into the bright spill of the windows.

## Watching the Dreamer

My son likes a light on for sleeping,  
the light in the hall or his birthday nightlight  
and once in the summer a fruit jar full of fireflies.  
Tonight the shade tree next to the house  
keeps the moon from his face  
but its light is everywhere in the room.  
His body curls in an attitude of prayer or interment  
and as the mouth begins moving in sleep  
speaking to no one,  
a tiny bubble appears in the fold of the lip.  
Clear, shining, a miniature moon.



## Abandoned Farm

Finally, the boys ransacked the barn  
dragging an old car into a pasture to rot.  
All its doors were left open  
marking the family escape.  
The bank took their animals, the land  
was turned loose on itself.  
They shuttered the house and went south.  
Rooms gather themselves in at the corners,  
toying with their portions of light.  
November is being ignored again,  
but for the mad birth in the yard  
reaching out at the sleeve,  
exposing a little more wrist.

## The Book

The floor of the room  
is bare except for a book  
lying half-opened on its spine.  
Sun shines through a window  
on its pages. A page  
stirs. With insect slowness  
it inches into a small arc,  
then stretches upright.  
The page wavers, falls  
to the other side. Perhaps  
the book is waking up, or  
the book is still asleep,  
dreaming of reading itself.

## Resting Place

In every direction from here the uneven hills  
make a great earthly bowl which we live in.  
My heart has arrived in the countryside—  
and would have me consider, on occasion, its increase.  
Every morning our dog sleeps in the field in the sun.  
When she dies I will bury her there,  
deep so the spring plow will not find her.  
But when I die I want friends to put me on the hill,  
their upraised shovels flashing a quick light  
all over this valley.

## Husband and Wife

After supper we linger in the kitchen.  
A sudden rainstorm has cleared  
and roof water taps softly on the porch.  
Some moth, its motor gone wild,  
dashes against the outside bulb as we talk.  
Slowly the light fades, taking us with it  
and for one moment we say nothing,  
looking at each other across the dark table.

# 4

## HELOISE AND ABELARD



## I. Separation

### Abelard Writes to Heloise

I never know who I am any more until I write to you.  
Before, I fancied my soul a small white stone resting inside me,  
waiting to be found by our Lord on the ocean floor.  
I would be happy so contained, to sleep with both eyes closed  
carried inside the gentle motion of my body.  
The place where I live now, the plants in my room  
this fabrication of flesh—  
all these things are alive but I am not at home in them.  
On warm days I walk under the tall oaks  
letting sunlight flash over me through the leaves  
until I feel like a jewel.  
When the bells for Compline strike their round notes  
calling the monks into the great silence of evening,  
my heart shudders loose and flies after the vanishing sound.  
Each day I am like a spirit newly invented by love,  
always alone with myself, always taking leave.

## Heloise to Abelard

Many times during the day  
the simplest act I perform makes me think of you.  
I rise to put wood on the fire in the abbey  
and I wonder if at that same moment you are cold.  
Because I am silent all day I notice small things  
that have no voices of their own.  
The way my solitude turns to loneliness  
when the wind blows rain against my window,  
the way our cat sometimes stares at everything and  
nothing  
as if she had mastered feeling. I do not envy her.  
Holding your letters  
my hand wishes to touch the ghost of yours on the page,  
and when I place my fingertips inside the perfect curve of  
your name,  
they wait as if at the opening of a shell.  
How long must we go on being father and mother to  
ourselves, alone?



## Abelard

Your love could never make me turn away from you.  
Does God love us so much we must not pray to Him?  
Is the dolphin too much loved by the sea it must abandon it  
for the element of earth? True, I have another life—  
and just as the dolphin must breathe his air,  
I have my books. But you forget I am not just a man any more,  
I am you, I am a woman now. I need both our lives to  
make one life.  
Heloise, my soul is in the sweetest danger it has ever known.  
The longer I am away from you,  
the greater I must reach out of myself to find you.  
I fear that someday, soon,  
my soul will gather itself into one breath  
and like the song of a bird  
cry out into the open air and vanish.

## Heloise

From my window I can watch the earth  
waking from its long sleep like a she-bear,  
browns and grays waiting to be washed clean  
when the first rains come, everything poised between  
    seasons,  
and I must try and be patient.  
Already the constellations of summer  
turn slowly toward us from below the horizon,  
heaven alive with animals in motion:  
a dragon, a horse, a lion, the great bear.  
Our small home, the earth, has the moon for its child  
and beyond it is the universe. Forgive me.  
All day I've been thinking the plainest thoughts—  
about my heart, about my arms and their need to hold you,  
about how I wish our life could be a simple thing.  
At least soon it will be warm again  
and in the nightly confusion of stars  
I will be able to look overhead near Dolphinus and the eagle  
and find a tall man bending his bow.

## H.

The shabby remains of last year's corn are visited by crows.  
Others drift in the sky mocking the landscape  
as if they were the last things alive on earth.  
Yesterday I came upon a flock of them  
covering the carcass of a fawn run down by dogs.  
Its neck was stripped bare, the adbomen scattered  
and within the cavity some tender remains of her feeding.  
I prayed that Saint Blaise would find and gather her soul,  
would release the look in those large eyes staring at nothing.  
And while I knelt I asked God that misfortune not destroy us  
as we reduce ourselves each day to paper  
and these gestures.

A.

The long winter has left me with its small view of life.  
Some nights I lie in bed unable to sleep,  
the sheets cold against my body  
and I think I do not know you, have never known you.  
With hands folded like a corpse,  
my manhood turned in on itself, useless,  
I feel no blood ties with myself.  
I fear I am becoming a dream version of who you think I am.  
What can we ever mean to each other at this distance?  
Like a lost child, tired of being lost,  
I can barely say your name to the wall.  
I must save my breath.

## II. Living Alone

### Abelard

After working all day in the fields  
helping prepare the earth for seed,  
I return to my room and wait for sleep.  
I have almost given up my reading.  
Watching the fading light soften the edges of things  
I begin to let go of my loneliness.  
A chair sends forth its thin shadow  
like a *thinker thinking of himself*.  
The sky runs through its last hues  
and miraculously the chair, the room,  
we vanish together.  
Gradually I hear the monks talking in sleep—  
they speak of their fathers, of women, of miracles.  
I make the cross in the darkness  
and may God forgive me I think only of you.

## Heloise

I seldom pray any more.  
When the others are at matins I stay in my room,  
discovering how to give the morning to myself.  
I can sit for hours, almost forgetting to breathe.  
One cloud passes over the sun and the land darkens like a stain.  
My solitude is becoming a society and I can see you all—  
one by one, father and mother, family, friends, my Abelard  
you stir inside and visit me like phantoms wearing my face.  
The people I am made of come back to me now,  
some walking past my window, some stopping to peer closely,  
ever circling my life, intoxicated, mysterious.

## Untitled

If it were left to me to love myself  
I would surely perish;  
if you had no other mirror but your face  
you would never believe how beautiful you are.  
In this way of loving we are like little replicas of God  
who loves us no matter how we present ourselves.  
Slowly I am coming to believe that love is a kind of calling,  
that God underlies this anguished design.  
When I walk in the village these days  
I have taken to putting my hands in the hands of beggars—  
and secretly I bless the strangers I come across.  
Could it be that all my life I have been preparing to love you  
and through you to love?

## Love Poem

I put myself to sleep dreaming of you.  
We are always together somewhere, we are not talking,  
we are not making love. We hold each other  
like two animals who know no speech,  
who would repair themselves by touch.  
For the first age I am holding you tightly in both my arms  
to hide you, to plant you inside me  
so you can live there and be safe,  
so I can live there and be whole.  
When it is my turn to rest in the fold of your arms  
like an infant suckling, I make a home there  
my body warmed by your body,  
my soul nourished by a second heartbeat.  
It is only after great passage of time  
that I trust my mind to words again—  
the body being its child is all demand and need.  
In my dream this time of first speaking never comes.



## Abelard Writes to Himself

1. Every day the sun rises from a new place on the  
horizon  
then arcs overhead like a handle for the earth's basket.  
God fulfills His yearly promise to us but I have nothing to  
offer Him.  
Listening to the monks chant the organum,  
their deep voices resounding from stone to stone,  
I wish that I could sing.  
I have spent my life discoursing on Heaven  
—as if God were an argument.  
Trees in the forest know that silence is praise,  
so when I pray now, I close my eyes and listen.
2. If I had merely wanted to amuse myself  
I would have waited for the secrecy of evening.  
But in the full glare of sunlight beneath apple trees,  
the two of us naked below the waist,  
our one skin vivid against the blossoms—  
it was to God I made the cry of longing.  
Half-dressed like a man,  
conjured by desire into a creature on all fours,  
I closed on her, entering her body to leave my own.  
If I was not a child of Heaven in those ardors,  
who then was I?

### III. Last Days

#### Paris

Blessed Mary Queen of silence,  
Queen of air and light  
and all things transparent and tender,  
protector of God's holy absence—  
please find me, be with me.

Today I visited the church of St. Denis  
to watch men on scaffolds  
setting in the Rose window. Thousands  
of pieces of painted glass, mullioned, foliate,  
each one its own size and shape, each one  
completing the circle. Inside the nave  
when the sun came out  
the high vaulted ceiling, thinly ribbed  
like the webbing of trees,  
and the obscure underreaches of transept  
were illumined by columns of colored light.  
I stirred the air with my hand  
until it swirled with motes  
turning azure, crimson, ochre, green—  
looking like crystalline heaven itself  
and the angelic hierarchies loosed  
into mad, miniature dance.  
It was a holy and glorious illusion.  
God is not there, in that place  
and the mother of God  
is nothing like a work of art.  
Slowly revolving with the sun  
the great Rose wheel is our testament for her,  
a thing to remind us of her blood, of God's blood,  
while blood itself goes its own way  
coursing through the body,  
restless, life-giving, dark.

## Heloise in Her Garden

1. With the swallows making ghostly sounds  
dipping and rolling in the evening air,  
and all our plants just pushing through the earth  
as if God had decided on their names  
but not their faces,  
the garden is the softest place to be  
in the abbey. Bringing vegetables  
to the table from their seeds  
is the only philosophy I have.  
There is nothing more I want to know.  
I work here whenever I can—  
sometimes I just sit and wonder  
what the plants would say  
if they could speak, what animal sounds  
they would make. I imagine that God has given  
each one a word to keep and that this word  
lets the plant live, lets the peas  
reach out blindly with their tough, springy tendrils  
as if there were nothing in the world but good.

2. The Rule of the Order teaches us to live  
toward absence, surrender,  
as if we were already nothing,  
as if we were not women. At night  
when mother would enter my room  
and say over me: *Bless this child*  
*in this darkened house*  
I would always be waiting for her,  
it was the way sleep came.  
There are no children here, no one  
in our lives but ourselves  
and we are allowed no mirrors  
but the faces we look upon.  
The sisters have put an effigy in the garden—  
dressed in a red hood and filled with straw,  
its hollow sleeves lift and flutter  
in the wind. It is there every morning  
and nights the moon sends its long shadow  
over the garden. Mother of God,  
have mercy on these, our empty, holy lives.







